

Friendship Pillar

Stu asks what it is that makes friendship the most difficult of the 4 pillars for a man. He wonders whether it's because we're afraid of emotion, of being vulnerable - yet if we disconnect, we're isolated and that's hell. "If the King provides but never connects, it's no good. If the Warrior protects but never connects, it's no good. If the Mentor teaches but never connects, it's no good. *It is not good for man to be alone!*"

I'm going to offer up what has kept me isolated for a half-century. It is *fear*, but not fear of emotion. I've always practiced the manly art of "never let 'em see you sweat." Why not? Because if they know that I am weak, and maybe I can't handle it alone, then what kind of King would I make? What leadership could I offer? What kind of Warrior would I be on the field of battle? Would I cut and run when the pressure got too much? What kind of Mentor would I be? What could I teach them other than how to crumble, and cower in the corner, and break down in tears? *Wus*. They'll never pick you for their stickball team if they know you're weak, unskilled, or afraid of the ball.

I felt that I could never open up because if they actually knew just how afraid and insecure I was, then it would undermine everyone's confidence in me. And if that happened, I would undermine my confidence in myself. Put up a wall. Paint it white. Make like nothing is wrong. Smile a lot. Make fun of all those other guys who can't handle it. Step on them to make myself appear better than them. Put 'em down so I can stand over them. Get critical. Get mean. Get silent. If I've gotta scream, or cry, or shudder, do it in private where no one can see - especially not my wife or kids. If they knew just how weak I am, they'll wonder who is going to take care of them - maybe they'll say to themselves, "If he can't handle it, how can I?"

In my own childhood, if I didn't handle it, it didn't get handled. I came from a very passive household. There was a huge burden on my shoulders. I couldn't afford to crumble - and I couldn't tell anyone else about what I was going through. Why not? Because those were the very people who were depending on me. My father. My mother. My brothers. In school I was pegged as a really happy-go-lucky kind of kid, always making jokes, always the clown. Well, clowns wear masks. And I had the best mask in town. I was so busy taking care of business that I had no time to build friendships, or play, or open up to somebody else. I lived between my ears in a fantasy world of my own creation. So what? What harm did it do? Let me tell you: it nearly destroyed me and my family. The repercussions are still being felt. People around me were hurt, not just me.

It took me a lifetime to discover, but my fear was groundless. It is revealing those fears that is most endearing to other people. They say, "Whew! I thought I was the only one feeling that way!" They say, "Gee, he's an honest and open guy that I can approach." They say, "What can I do to help support you right now?" They say, "You're not alone. We're right here with you, no matter what." That's friendship. That's connectedness. That's the most wonderful part of life. Other people can love me, not *in spite* of my weaknesses, but *because* of them. I never knew. Did you?